

INFORMATION REPORT

COUNTRY

Guatemala

REPORT NO. 00-B-71539

SUBJECT

An Evaluation of the Significance of the Shift in Political Power since 1944

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CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
RELEASE IN FULL

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(BY SOURCE)

1944 to 1953

DATE (OF INFO.) 1953

2003

RESPONSIVE TO	
1	2
CD NO.	
DD/C NO.	
ORR NO.	
DAS NO.	
OCI NO.	

DATE DISTR. 28 Dec 53

NO. OF PAGES 6

NO. OF ENCLS.

SUPP. TO
REPORT NO.

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SOURCE US citizen, an outstanding student of Latin American history.

Source has been intimately associated with the educational system in Guatemala from 1945 to 1953 and maintains close contact with his professional counterparts by correspondence and biennial trips to Guatemala. Because of his stature as an historian and his knowledge of political events in Guatemala since the October Revolution, he was invited in November 1953 to present the following paper before a meeting of US historians.

1. The arresting feature of the monument designed in Guatemala City to commemorate the heroes of the 1944 revolution was a triumvirate of symbolical figures representing a soldier, a university student and a laborer. These three groups were recognized as having supplied the major share of the manpower and a part of the leadership for the movement which accomplished the downfall of the dictatorships of General Jorge Ubico and his personally designated successor, General Federico Ponce Valdes. The triumph of the revolution brought to control of the machinery of government social and economic groups largely new to the field of political action and thus produced a highly significant shift in political gravity. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the effects of that shift in political power and to evaluate its significance and portent as a social movement.
2. To understand the roles of the protest groups in the revolutionary movement, it is essential first to know the nature of their grievances against the old regime. The tenets of Guatemalan Liberalism had been so long in vogue without substantial change that, unnoticed by the party leadership, time had eroded away most of their challenge and appeal, particularly to younger, ambitious elements of society. During the long ascendancy of the Liberals, worship at the shrine of material progress had produced a significant transformation in the physical and economic condition of the country. But with the pride and glamour of innovation gone, the very social and economic groups which material development brought into existence could look upon the instruments of the transformation with disillusioned eyes. Obligations assumed and concessions made as the necessary price of progress in an earlier age could be viewed by a rising generation as unwarranted and onerous public burdens, and foreign investors, hailed as benefactors of the nation by Liberal orators at the turn of the century, could be suspiciously regarded as foreign exploiters of Guatemalan resources, labor and public welfare.

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3. Unaware of any impending change in public attitude, the Ubico regime consistently demonstrated traditional Liberal materialistic emphasis, obliviousness to spiritual and intellectual values, and harshness of method toward political dissenters and adversaries. The cumulative effect of its abuses, shortcomings, and errors of judgment added impetus to a growing unrest which was made even more acute by the economic pressures exerted by a world economy geared to the necessities of war. To these vague resentments, the world crusade against totalitarian dictatorship and the accompanying idealistic pronouncements gave ideological content and justification.
4. Each of the three groups which formed the revolutionary spearhead also harbored special grievances against the existing order. Students and teachers had once been accorded a status of some importance in Liberal philosophy, but by the end of the Ubico administration their role had been stripped of all dignity and prestige, and the current salary scales placed them on an economic level little above that of domestic servants. Moreover, the prevailing official standard of values offered little promise of improved status in the future. The tendency of the dictator was to curtail, rather than to expand, educational facilities and thus to thwart the hopes of the lower levels of the social order that they might be able to improve their positions through education. The contempt of the dictator for the educational function of the schools was manifested in several ways. He militarized the schools of the Republic, required both students and teachers to march endlessly in processions to grace his festivals, and, as titular head of the Ministry of Education, he kept Antonio Villacorta, an old man of some intellectual achievement and scholarly renown but who demonstrated for the problems of popular education no understanding and no concern. When resistance to the dictator became overt, the teachers in the person of Maria Chinchilla, an attractive young woman killed when Ubico's police machine-gunned a women's demonstration, provided the revolution with its protomartyr and its emotional appeal.
5. A similar discontent was brewing among the younger military men. The highest military posts were monopolized by old and trusted, although often allegedly incompetent, henchmen of Ubico who maintained the populace in the grip of the dictator by the most arbitrary and brutal use of force. It was charged that an extravagant number of promotions was given within this group without regard for capacity, merit or service, but that younger officers were able to envision military careers only in the humble status of commandants of cadets in the militarized schools. The ultimate insult to the younger military was the retention as Minister of War of General José Reyes who was popularly reputed to be, even at an advanced age, an illiterate Indian still. The regime was characterized as supported by, and fostering, an oppressive militarism distasteful to the public and frustrating, or even insulting, to the younger elements of the military service.
6. The working class was also caught up in the brewing unrest. It was beginning to feel the economic effects of the war in the form of pressure from rising prices against relatively static incomes. The workers were not permitted to organize in order to seek improvement of their situation by collective action and any attempt by such means to secure a more advantageous wage scale or better working conditions was treated as a breach of public order. Under the circumstances, the workers felt that the regime had abandoned them to the exploitation of foreign interests which enjoyed the favor of the dictator.
7. It was the university students, the teachers, the workers, and the younger military men who, with important help from the professional groups, actually precipitated the movement that ended the long period of so-called Liberal domination. The university students, emulating a similar action in El Salvador which brought the dictator of that country a fugitive to Guatemala, began the general strike which caused Ubico to step down. During the interim regime of General Ponce, labor was allowed to organize in sindicatos and leaders sprung from the middle ranks of the social scale began to give form and expression to the discontent of the workers. But when the Railroad Union and the Union of Workers of Tiquisate began to press

- demands for higher salaries, the movement was branded by the Ponce government as the work of agitators calculated to upset the public order. Political parties were formed during the same period, with heavy participation by students and professors and professional groups, first in the capital and then in the departments. One of the parties, Renovación Nacional, persuaded Dr Juan José Arévalo, a former teacher in Guatemala, to return from his exile in Argentina to become a candidate for the presidency in the forthcoming election. When the Ponce regime appeared to be intriguing to perpetuate itself in power with all the hated attributes of the Ubico dictatorship, the same groups united and, students and workers fighting by the side of the military, overthrew the government of Ubico's designate on 20 Oct 44.
8. Their successful revolution earned the dissident groups the opportunity to organize a government and to propose a program more satisfactory to them than those of the fallen regimes. A revolutionary junta, composed of two young army officers and a civilian, was installed to preside over the government until the elections were held and a new constitution was drafted. The inauguration of Juan José Arévalo, the successful candidate for the presidency, under the new fundamental law on 15 Mar 45, initiated the constitutional regime which continues to the present.
 9. The key posts of the new governments were filled by men of the revolutionary party who were, in general, lacking in experience and whose principal qualification for office was a record of opposition to the old regimes or distinguished service to the Revolution at some stage of its development. The new bureaucracy was formed primarily by groups from the middle ranks of the social order, among which teachers and university students, the professional class and a sprinkling of military men were conspicuous. Although the workers were not directly represented, their middle rank leaders were to be found in official positions.
 10. Ideologically the new government did not rapidly catch its bearing. The unifying force of the revolutionary party had been the common determination to overthrow the dictatorship but, once the work of destruction was accomplished, no similar unanimity of opinion was discernible on the essentials of a constructive program to follow. Arévalo had, during the electoral campaign, propounded his doctrine of "spiritual socialism," a confused body of philosophy which the revolutionaries assumed to be as profound as it was obscure, but it struck no popular chord and contributed little or nothing toward establishing either immediate or ultimate objectives for the revolution. In reality, the Arévalo administration began with no coherent ideology and no program.
 11. A strong sense of the urgency of national regeneration as a patriotic necessity was a conspicuous characteristic of the revolutionary current. The absence of either a sharply defined ideology or agreement upon the essential elements of a program consistent with these aspirations toward which energies bent on national improvement could be directed, made it easy for many revolutionaries, including some of the sincerely idealistic, to drift into political opportunism or to be attracted to projects of predominately nationalistic purport. The early experience of the Arévalo administration demonstrated, whether by accident or by design, that nationalistic actions evoked widespread and enthusiastic popular support. Imperialism, particularly as it bore upon relations between Guatemalan laborers and foreign-owned enterprises, and the controversy between the governments of Guatemala and the UK over Belize, provided the government with an issue on which, temporarily at least, it could unite in its support the diverse factions which overthrew Ubico, turn popular attention away from defects and divisions in the internal administration, and, perhaps, eventually create a unified revolutionary party.
 12. Communist elements recognized in the nationalistic emphasis of the government an area of possible ideological agreement which might be exploited to their advantage. By singling out the US, of all the Western democracies, for attack and concentrating on the anti-imperialist theme, they might find it possible to travel, at least for a time, in the company of the ardent nationalists and of the opportunists who flocked

to the support of a popular issue. In pursuit of this tactic, the Communists cast themselves in the role of the most vociferous and uncompromising of Guatemalan nationalists and, as such, made themselves during both the administration of Arévalo and the regime of Jacobo Arbenz which succeeded it, the indispensable spearheads for measures which more timid leadership might have been reluctant to advocate. The popularity of actions directed against the US made it virtually impossible for the enemies of Communism to attack the Communist leaders on the basis of their program with any hope of success.

13. The revolutionists of 1944 resorted to the use of force in order to capture the machinery of government, control of which they considered necessary for the redress of their grievances. It has been characteristic of the period since 1944 that the groups newly risen to power have sought to make and consolidate their gains chiefly by political action. Their record provides an insight into both the special interests of each group and the tactics employed in an attempt to reconcile and harmonize them into a pattern of political action capable of commanding the unified support of all revolutionary elements.
14. The young military men of the new regime were the first to reap the rewards of successful revolution. They were able immediately to purge from the military organization the officers highest in rank and, incidentally, those most advanced in age, and to secure control in their own hands. The military force was constituted the "National Army of the Revolution," and was given special status as guardian of the public liberty, protector of legally constituted governments, and defender of the Constitution. Although theoretically an apolitical, obedient, and non-deliberative body, the attitude of the army has been a powerful, if not the dominant factor in all post-revolutionary administrations. It is a fact of perhaps equal significance that the middle class army has consistently supported those administrations.
15. Teachers and students expected from the new regimes a program of extensive improvement of educational opportunities which would underwrite the democratic bases guaranteed by the new constitution and elevate to a position of prestige the intellectual and cultural values which Ubico scorned. As tangible proofs of the reality of intellectual freedom, the schools were demilitarized, and the National University was granted autonomy. A Faculty of Humanities was added to those already existing in the University and a Popular University was established to help propagate the fuller cultural life which the revolution promised. Salaries of teachers were raised and they were allowed to organize a labor union. Schools suppressed by Ubico were re-opened, and an extensive program of school building construction was planned. In a dramatic effort to free the country at one blow of the burden and stigma of a predominantly illiterate population, and to establish the indispensable basis for a functioning democracy, an intensive literacy program was inaugurated. The new regime was obviously attempting to give dignity and some economic security to the teaching profession and to achieve a nationalistic yearning for cultural respectability among the civilized nations of the earth.
16. Labor likewise earned its reward for participation in the revolution. The Constitution of 1945 specifically recognized among the basic rights of labor those to have employment, to organize in sindicatos, and to strike. It also established the principles of compulsory preferential employment of Guatemalan laborers in equality of circumstances, and of obligatory hiring of Guatemalan nationals to account for minimum percentages of both positions and payrolls. These provisions, together with the body of social legislation incorporated in the Constitution, and the social security system provided for in the same instrument were intended to give status and security to laborers. Moreover, the government has maintained an attitude of interest and sympathy toward the syndicalist movement and toward the demands of striking laborers which employers, especially foreign-owned enterprises, have characterized as less than objective.

17. The idea of binding small cultivators to the revolution by some variety of agrarian reform was apparently a part of the revolutionary strategy from the beginning. The Arevalo administration constructed a model agricultural community at Poptun in an attempt to colonize the allegedly fertile but unoccupied lands of the Petén, but colonists from densely populated areas refused when the settlement was completed to emigrate to a site that, for want of a road, could be reached only by air. The Arbenz-sponsored agrarian reform undertakes the distribution of uncultivated lands located in the already settled areas. The prevailing system of large landholdings in the densely populated areas of Guatemala makes land redistribution desirable, but there was no keen national awareness of the problem and no strong popular demand for reform. There was no Zapata in the Guatemalan revolution. The agrarian reform law is apparently an attempt to create a body of peasant small landowners whose economic stake in the maintenance of the status quo will tie them politically to the revolutionary party. It is also possible that the measure was, in part, a device for placing beyond the reach of litigation the properties of German finqueros intervened and expropriated during the second World War. Whatever its motivation, the law enjoys unquestioned local popularity and, except for die-hard conservatives, its critics now confine themselves to pointing out defects and abuses in its methods rather than in its objectives. It is possible that future historians may discover in the law a statesman's measure which averted in Guatemala a bloody prelude to land distribution on the pattern of Mexico or China.
18. In summary, the revolutionary activity of 1944 transferred control of the political power in Guatemala from the old aristocracy to social and economic elements of the population that would in our society be called middle class and proletarian. A social revolution was thus carried through its political phase, and the revolutionary parties next attempted, by means of a legislative program to consolidate the social and economic phases as well. In some respects resembling the Mexican revolution, upon which certain of its details were consciously patterned, the Guatemalan revolution lacked much of the widespread, deep-seated, and burning popular demand for basic reform which characterized the former and on the basis of which an obviously revolutionary program could be built. The middle rank leadership in Guatemala, therefore, sought issues capable of compelling the enthusiasm and loyalty of the masses. Patriotic at its inception, the revolutionary movement found in nationalism the most effective issue on which to consolidate a wide base of popular support.
19. Measures of great economic and social significance have been carried into effect apparently without plan, but consistent with certain objectives of the revolution. The new order breaks the exclusive claim of the old aristocracy to respectability and attempts to establish bases which will assure dignity and some security to the members of the middle and lower middle social and economic orders. The base of political democracy has also been considerably broadened. Suffrage has been opened to all men and to literate women, and political activity has been extended on such an unprecedented scale that some institutions traditionally oblivious to politics, such as the cofrades of the Indians, are said to have taken on political attributes. It appears that the revolutionary leadership has been successful, by these measures, in welding together in its support a class of favored interests composed of army officers, teachers, organized labor, and recently, a class of small cultivators whose economic and social gains spring directly from the revolution.
20. As a result of the nationalistic tone of many of the measures adopted by the new governments, particularly the crusade against US imperialism in any of its real or imagined forms, the Communists were provided with an issue on which they could make common cause with nationalists who perhaps agreed with them in nothing else. Posing as the most ardent of Guatemalan nationalists they have worked their way with relative safety against attack from their enemies, into the position of wheel horses for nationalistic measures. The degree to which they have penetrated and influenced the government will probably not be accurately known until Guatemalan nationalists are confronted with a choice between the fundamentally opposed interests of their

own nationalism and international Communism. It would be the role of wisdom for the US Government, in dealing with the current regime, to distinguish carefully, but decisively, between the two.

21. Aldous Huxley might perhaps allow, at this point, a paraphrase of his dictum that "To understand European politics, one should read the history of Central America." One has the feeling, in studying Guatemala since 1944, that many aspects of that situation have counterparts elsewhere in our troubled world. Perhaps we would be justified in assuming that recent events in other underdeveloped areas might be better understood in the light of the Guatemalan revolution, that "to understand the contemporary world, one should read the recent history of Guatemala."

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